

## **Testimony of Jessica DiGennaro, to Senate Committee on Aging and Youth 8/8/2023**

Thank you Chair Woman and Co-Chairwoman for the opportunity to speak in front of you all today. It is truly an honor. In the next moments I kindly ask for your patience, as well as your compassion and understanding with what I am about to say.

October 26, 2015 the following letter was delivered to our home. It reads:

Dear Autumn and Paige,

It is my pleasure to extend my heartfelt gratitude for your generous appreciation of the men and women in the Altoona Police Department. Your act of kindness is to be congratulated. Donating your savings to purchase lunch for the police officers is a wonderful act of kindness. At a time when volunteerism is no longer stressed as an important aspect of community life, you stand out as an example for others. You have a strong sense of civic duty that I truly admire. I know your parents are very proud of you. Sincerely Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr

Little did our family know at the time after this letter arrived, that even though our children were doing good in our community and making a difference in the lives of many, the reality of evil came knocking on our door.

Nothing, and I mean nothing can adequately prepare a parent to hear the words that their child was sexually assaulted, especially in our family. You see, both myself and my husband were victims of childhood sexual abuse. Because of those experiences in our lives, we were very cautious and had many safe guards in place to help protect our children. Even though the barriers and safeguards we had in place were penetrated by pure evil, those things allowed our daughter the opportunity to have the courage and strength to come forward and openly disclose to us what had taken place.

The moments that occurred after our daughter's disclosure would set the pace for determining how Autumn and our whole family would start to heal from this tragedy. As I look back, I see first-hand how God had been so good to set the right people and plans in motion that would aid us along this journey of healing. The CAC played a vital role in all of this.

On February 2, 2019 Our daughter's initial forensic interview led to a path to so many resources through the CAC that aided us on this journey. As a team, the members involved in our daughter's forensic interview worked together delicately for the common purpose of making this initial process less traumatic. By less traumatic, I mean that our daughter only had to recount her trauma once, and that was enough. It was only possible to accomplish that scenario by bringing all members of the agencies involved together at the same time. Our family agrees that this is the best way to approach anyone who has endured trauma and has the courage and strength to come forward. Every child in the state of Pennsylvania and beyond should be afforded the same opportunity to experience this initial type of personal care and concern for their specific case, no matter what! The CAC's model for this is impressive and certainly provides the best way to reduce the trauma in an already traumatic experience.

The CAC offered some very valuable resources to our daughter. Two very important services that were utilized were the pfa accompaniment and court accompaniment. Having to face your perpetrators and their families was no easy task. But I cannot even begin to express, as a parent, what it's like to watch your child hold their head high in a very stressful situation. All because of the person sitting right next to

them that is offering support and help through these very difficult situations. Our daughter's advocate, Mr. Richard Servello went above and beyond. I can remember feeling comforted knowing that the best person was right beside our daughter. The amount of knowledge he shared with Autumn and our family prior to the pfa and court accompaniment prepared us to fully face these upcoming obstacles with understanding and wisdom on how to correctly proceed. Each obstacle presented its own set of challenges. None of which we had ever experienced before. The unknown seemed to be the most challenging. Mr. Servello made sure that those challenges would be less stressful and traumatic for Autumn and our family. I cannot even begin to imagine how we would of gotten through this process without his care and concern for our daughter and our family.

The counseling services provided by the CAC were also invaluable to our daughter and family. The following words of wisdom were shared with our daughter during her counseling sessions. "You won't fully get over your trauma experience, but you'll be able to get through it!" Such powerful insight into the realities of trauma. I can attest to the fact due to my own experiences with trauma that this statement is in fact true. The counseling services proved to be a blessing in the midst of not only dealing with this trauma as a whole, but also having to navigate through some difficult circumstances when we knew our family had to sell our home and move to remove Autumn from any future interaction with her perpetrators. The levels of support that Autumn received, as well as our family were again an absolute blessing.

In Autumn's own words, the counseling services provided from the CAC have taught me different ways to deal with emotional strain, trauma, and anxiety and I still use those tips and suggestions to this day. This counseling has truly helped to shape me into the woman I am right now. Without this, I don't ever believe I would have healed in areas that I have, the way I have. The counseling services really helped me with converting my emotions, whether it would be through art, or just simply writing them down instead of speaking about it. It also helped to instill in myself the courage, even today to speak about this. This helped me to realize that the assault was not my fault. That there was and is nothing wrong with me, that I am not defined by my trauma.

Here we are nearly five years later, and we have been given the wonderful opportunity to share with you all just a small glimpse into a portion of this journey and how the CAC was a powerful resource through all of it. Evil thought it would win, but I'm here to tell you it did not. The initial letter that I read to you in the beginning from Senator Casey Jr, was the start of an amazing journey that has in fact impacted the lives of thousands of children and first responders in Central Pennsylvania. All because of our oldest daughter Autumn and her influence on her little sister to truly care about others in our community. Little did she know then that she would have a direct hand, over the last eight years in aiding first responders with the ability to help calm traumatized children soon after a traumatic event.

I will leave you with this. Psalm 59:16 But I will sing of thy power; Yea, I will sing aloud of thy mercy in the morning: For thou hast been my defense and refuge in the day of my trouble. Our daughter and our entire family is confident in knowing that God has gone before us through all of this. He has guided our very steps and has brought together some of the most amazing people from the CAC to help our daughter and family through this. We have no doubts that each of you in this room has the ability to make sure that the required funding is in place so that every child and family is able to have the experiences that we had through this part of our journey. It's amazing to watch God take some of our messes that were created by others and turn it into a message to help others.

Thank you!